Modernity as it could have been

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Les Promesses du passé : une histoire discontinue de l'art dans l'ex-Europe de l'Est, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2010.

Tobias Putrih : Šiška International, Paris : Ed. du Centre Pompidou, 2010.

- 1 "Eastern Europe doesn't exist any longer" : the opening statement of the curators' text for the exhibition catalogue *Les Promesses du passé : une histoire discontinue de l'art dans l'ex-Europe de l'Est* lucidly formulates the current state of affairs of the subject matter in question. Indeed, after twenty years and dozens of exhibitions addressing, reflecting on, deconstructing, critically investigating and conceptually reformulating the "former East" of Europe, its communist past and post-communist present, today's all-European conclusion is practically unanimous. Applied to today's art, the simple juxtaposition East/West-as much as the desire to find some common "post-communist" features- is largely outdated. In this vein, the book refuses to simply incorporate some homogeneous "East" into the dominant narrative of Western modernism ; instead, it articulates its lines of thinking in relation to the notion of discontinuous histories -"fragmented histories of individuals and groups that shape the unofficial mythologies of given spaces" (Zdenka Badovinac, p. 222). One detail should be mentioned here : the heated discussions related to the differences and shared aspects of art in East and West have been proliferating everywhere but in France, so the catalogue faces a double challenge : to plug into the current discursive situation, while catching up on the domestic French lacunae.
- 2 The contributions are thus divided into four headings : "Essais & Entretien" written specifically for the catalogue, the artists' entries, "Sources, archives, documents et films (Espace 315)", and the concluding "Anthologie" section of texts published since 1999, aimed at shedding light for French readers on the principal stages of the recent "historization of the East" and its discontents. In similar fashion, each entry for the

artist participating in the exhibition features relevant texts and/or extracts previously published on different occasions and translated into French. The documentary section of Espace 315, devised by Nataša Petrešin-Bachelez, brings together a selection of a largely unknown materials related to the “French connections” with the still-communist-East—such as archives of the Biennale de Paris and those of Pierre Restany, who, insatiably curious as he was, was personally and creatively involved with several artists from the different countries of Eastern Europe and helped to have their work exhibited. The Parisian Galerie des Locataires was exclusively dedicated to the “Franco-Yugoslav exchange” (Marijan Susovski, p. 190) while the Gallery 1-37 exhibited Daniel Buren with Henryk Stazewski or Carl Andre followed by Edward Krasinski within the same white walls.

- 3 This variety of texts—archival materials, numerous essays, dialogues and artists’ entries—develops discontinuous art histories: “diverses niches, impasses, recoins et passages étroits” (Christine Macel/Joanna Mytkowska). The anti-art of the Yugoslav group Gorgona, and the performance activities of Jiří Kovanda may or may not be connected to respective Western currents, but their “non-conformist modernism” (Jan Verwoert, p. 31) is translated into conceptually concise and socially precise gestures, although in different historical conditions. The question remains, however, where to draw the new lines of differences and similarities for this discordant yet common history of modernism in Europe, and how to grasp its unequal rhythms. As argued by Igor Zabel, the diverse “universal” art languages—be it Constructivism or Conceptualism—take on a particular sense based on the context of their creation and we cannot really understand them “in abstracto”. One of the most brilliant European art intellectuals of the 1990s and 2000s who died an untimely death in 2005, Zabel formulates in his essay one of the crucial issues of the post-communist East/West exchange. “Former East” became the common denominator for the many and varied countries located in Central and Eastern Europe, yet nobody ever speaks of “Former West”. “West claims to be a clearly defined and firmly established political identity, which absorbs the other without bearing any changes and consequences for itself” (Zabel, p. 211) Postulated in 2000, the question of “former West” bore rich fruit. Adopting the method of “turning the screw”, the new generation of exhibition projects today is searching for new vantage points from which to view and interpret recent history with a marked involvement in post-communist and post-colonial thought. The most recent examples are the long-running platform entitled “Former West” initiated by BAK Utrecht, and “Monument of Transformation” in Prague, in both of which the *Promesses du passé* obviously sees its counterparts.
- 4 In an attempt to offer a post-colonial viewpoint, Vit Havránek’s insightful essay (p. 26) further elaborates on how the linear temporality of ideological colonization was constructed and why it made the “East” appear homogeneously a-historical, as if locked in a communist eternity. Some artistic practices managed, however, to disrupt this dominant temporality, either generating a counter-discourse in private spaces, or creating other methods of symbolic resistance. By emphasizing the modernist value of symbolic resistance, other texts highlight the coexistence of different narratives, their conflicting time-frames and unequal rhythms, testing the ground for a common discontinuous modernity. We should not talk about some “second way” for European modernism, but rather aim at formulating a paradigm based on “relational geography” and “horizontal history”, both perceived through the categories of cultural differences. (Piotrowski). The aim is not to include the different forms of Conceptualism,

performance, Fluxus, and Mail art produced in Eastern Europe within a universal historical occidental time, but to contextualize them as multi-referential works, argues Svetlana Boym. She proposes the notion of “off-modern”, inviting us to bring back to history the disorientations and radical ruptures in tradition, the lacunae of forgetting, loss of common references, all the forms of “lateral potential” which would formulate modernity “as it could have been” (p. 217). In this context, Tobias Putrih’s work *Šiška International*, to which a special publication is dedicated, might be seen as a telling example of the present-day generation’s multi-referential approach to modernism’s histories and potential. Combining two modernist cinemas of the 1960s, one in East Berlin, the other in Ljubljana, his installation explores modernist architecture’s past promises, dialectical ruins and Leninist nostalgias, trying to turn the founding fathers’ work into a kind of “utopic justice”.